

Interagency Lessons Learned in Afghanistan

30th Space Communications Squadron (Barry Loo)

By TUCKER B. MANSAGER

Future conflicts will likely continue to blur the line between war and peace, necessitating close cooperation between groups previously considered the exclusive practitioners of each—soldiers and diplomats. Just as terrorism crosses military, economic, and criminal spheres, U.S. efforts to counter it must closely integrate the elements of national power—diplomatic, informational, military, and economic—and reveal no seams the enemy can exploit. Occasionally, the interagency process meant to bring all these elements to bear has worked well. More commonly, the coordination of these elements has been haphazard and ad hoc, particularly

at lower levels. Action is required; the system will not improve by itself.

A recent effort to improve lower-level coordination took place with the establishment of Combined Forces Command–Afghanistan (CFC–A) alongside the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, resulting in significant lessons learned in the execution of interagency policy that might be applied in other countries and situations. Such basic concepts as collocation of senior military and diplomatic leaders, consensus building, and military planning support to the U.S. Ambassador all contributed to greater integration in implementing interagency policy and increased success in carrying out U.S. foreign policy in Afghanistan.

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Problems for the Joint Force Commander

Numerous interagency structures are meant to help integrate the efforts of the various executive agencies and departments in their pursuit of foreign policy goals. Unfortunately, they do little to help implement policy on the ground or deal with the overarching integration required of a joint force commander (JFC). Often they are outside the commander's control, or are de facto limited to one country. Not only do these structures not help, but they also pose a series of problems for the JFC.

The commander in a joint operational area (JOA) has no regional peer from the State Department or any other U.S. Government agency. While joint doctrine notes that Ambassadors operate at both the operational and tactical levels, their authority is effectively limited to their country of accreditation, as explained in Joint Publication 3-08, *Interagency Coordination During Joint Operations*. The same is generally true of representatives of other executive and intelligence agencies. The JFC's area, on the other hand, encompasses both the primary country of operation and all or part of neighboring countries; thus, the commander will have to coordinate policy or operations with multiple country teams. The first level at which the JFC may encounter a State Department individual with regional authorities comparable to his own is at the regional assistant secretary level. For example, the Assistant Secretary for South Asian Affairs has responsibility for U.S. relations with Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan, among others. But since State geographic areas, as well as those of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), are not aligned with combatant

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Commander Combined Forces Command–Afghanistan LTG David Barno, USA, meets with Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai during visit by Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld

commander areas of responsibility, a JFC with a JOA encompassing both Pakistan and Tajikistan might also have to deal with the Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs. Subsequently, such coordination often must be effected at the combatant command or even Joint Staff level—distant in time, space, and perspective from the area of conflict.

Even inside a given country, with one country team, cultural differences between foreign service and military officers complicate policy coordination and implementation. While military officers are focused on the military element of foreign policy, foreign service officers deal with all aspects of that policy. Detailed planning is a core activity of the military, while general planning is acceptable in the State Department; teamwork is rewarded in the military, while individual achievement is highly regarded in the State Department. Misperceptions and cultural differences add more friction and challenges to the coordination and execution of foreign policy under stressful and often austere conditions.

Cultural differences can also exacerbate the issue of who is in charge and when. In some contingencies, it is clear who has primacy in a given country or operation. Since Washington did not have an Ambassador in Kabul in October 2001 or in Baghdad in March 2003, General Tommy Franks,

Commander, U.S. Central Command, was obviously running the show along with his subordinate commanders. In other operations, such as disaster relief, humanitarian support,

numerous interagency structures do little to help implement policy on the ground or deal with the integration required of a joint force commander

and noncombatant evacuations, the Ambassador or chief of mission assumes the lead.

Operations *Enduring Freedom* and *Iraqi Freedom* seem to fall into a category of neither war nor peace. While the initial phases of both were clearly in the military's purview, a continuing insurgency in the reconstruction phases (greater in Iraq than Afghanistan) has blurred the line between war and peace. Although joint doctrine categorizes counterinsurgency as an “operation other than war” and the Army dubs it a “stability operation,” these constructs may not help the JFC execute his combat mission when mixed with humanitarian relief, reconstruction, and stability operations.¹ Who is in charge in such a situation, the Ambassador or

the JFC? This nebulous condition could cause further conflict or uncoordinated efforts between the military and civilian components of foreign policy, depending on the Ambassador or JFC.

Some structures exist for developing interagency policy. What configuration or organization translates the policy into coherent, coordinated orders that are executed on the ground? While the Executive Steering Group cited in joint doctrine has the potential to provide such a mechanism within a country, a JFC's operational area regularly encompasses more than one country. In theory, a commander could gather senior representatives, even Ambassadors, from all the countries in his JOA to serve as a super executive steering group, but since each Ambassador is an authority unto himself, and the JFC has no authority over him, the commander must sell his plan to a group of senior foreign service officers or political appointees who may have divergent ideas on how to implement national policy.

Afghanistan as a Case Study

Many in Bagram and Kabul felt that Operation *Enduring Freedom* had nominally transitioned to stability operations in May 2003, when Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld stated that “major combat activity” had changed to “stability and stabilization.” Yet Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF)-180

remained focused on combat operations in country, to the detriment of implementing an integrated U.S. military effort to help rebuild Afghanistan.² The most senior U.S. military leaders were in Bagram, physically and perhaps psychologically separated from Afghan political and international diplomatic efforts in Kabul. In October 2003, U.S. Central Command began to form CFC-A to put more emphasis on the political-military aspects of efforts in the country; then Major General David Barno, USA, arrived early that month to assemble a staff and structures to knit together the military and political work. Originally conceived as a “pocket staff,” CFC-A soon took over all higher level aspects of political-military coordination, as well as overall direction of military activity in the JOA, allowing CJTF-180 and later CJTF-76 to focus on tactical warfighting and stability operations.³

Locating CFC-A headquarters close to the U.S. Embassy in Kabul was critical to helping integrate diplomatic and aid efforts with military operations. Until that point, Embassy officers had to travel to Bagram to consult with military planners or operators, and vice versa. This trip required numerous security measures on the part of the military and an even greater effort on the part of the unarmed Embassy members, making it so difficult that the two organizations often worked without interaction. To further integrate the military and diplomatic aspects of the mission, the commander (COM CFC-A) maintained his office and personal staff in the Embassy, two doors from Zalmay Khalilzad, who became U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan in November 2003. Numerous high-ranking visitors to Kabul praised the team’s progress, which resulted in a number of lessons learned on how to improve interagency cooperation at the lower end of the operational level.

Lessons to Learn

Collocate the Senior Military and Diplomatic Leaders. The benefit of physical collocation of senior military and diplomatic leaders and their staffs cannot be overemphasized; nearly all other lessons learned were influenced by physical proximity and its beneficial effect on personal interaction and coordination. Being in the same place allowed more agility and speed in dealing with rapidly developing crises. Additionally, locating the senior military commander in the Embassy made a clear statement to allies,

U.S. Agency for International Development trucks depart Chaklala Air Base, Pakistan, with earthquake relief supplies delivered by U.S. forces



30th Space Communications Squadron (Dayton Mitchell)

the Afghan people and government, and the world that the United States was entering a phase of *Enduring Freedom* focused on reconstruction and stability.

Senior leadership presence in the Embassy allowed military representation in what was referred to as “Core Group,” a

to implement ideas from a discussion paper entitled “Provincial Strategies,” written by Brahimi’s deputy, Jean Arnault. Thus, CFC-A developed what became known as the “Strategy South and East” through an intense consensus-building process.

The initial framework of the strategy

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smaller meeting of top Embassy officers, instituted by Ambassador Khalilzad and hosted by the Ambassador or, in his absence, the Deputy Chief of Mission. Attendance regularly included COM CFC-A; Chief, Office of Military Cooperation-Afghanistan; CIA Chief of Station; and sometimes the USAID Mission Director and a few other selected parties. Sensitive information was shared and critical decisions were often made in the Core Group Meeting. Collocation allowed regular participation and input into this vital forum.

Build Consensus. Proximity made it easier to build consensus. With no command authority between military and Embassy staff, and with questions about who was in charge, CFC-A relied on extensive efforts at consensus-building to develop and implement coherent, cohesive plans and policy. In fall 2003, Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary General Lakhdar Brahimi requested development of a plan to increase stability in strife-torn southern and eastern Afghanistan. In response, the CFC-A staff began work on a political-military strategy

was developed within the military staff, based on guidance from the commander. Once it was framed, the Director of Plans and Policy (CJ-5) first presented the concept to senior Embassy leaders without the Ambassador present. The Deputy Chief of Mission, USAID Mission Director, and others provided insights to the concepts; more importantly, they took away a sense of ownership in the strategy. After making adjustments based on the feedback from the senior Embassy staff, the CJ-5 and COM CFC-A presented the strategy to the Ambassador, making adjustments based on his suggestions and receiving his support and concurrence before proceeding. This process continued in widening circles to brief and gain support from Brahimi and Arnault, the five lead nations in security sector reform (the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, Japan, and Italy), and ultimately President Hamid Karzai and appropriate officials in his government. The interagency consensus building within the Embassy helped iron out initial problems in the plan, making it more acceptable to the other non-U.S. organizations,

and convinced senior leaders in the Embassy to support the plan even though they answered only to the Ambassador, not the military commander.

Provide Military Planning Support. Early in his tenure as COM CFC-A, General Barno directed that the staff provide a small group of field grade officers, led by a colonel, to form the Embassy Interagency Planning Group. As noted, detailed planning is not generally recognized as a State Department core competency; furthermore, an Embassy staff has no plans section per se. The planning group was envisaged to provide the Ambassador with this type of capability, but it had effects beyond the initial concept. The seconding of military officers to the Ambassador helped further integrate political and military efforts through closer and more continuous coordination. This dedicated group provided the Ambassador military expertise for which he might otherwise have turned to the CFC-A staff, distracting it from its other missions. For example, the group was able to collect and collate information about nearly all U.S. efforts in Afghanistan, be they military, USAID, or nongovernmental, to give the Ambassador an overall vision and indicate gaps or overlap. That, in turn, allowed him to adjust efforts and seek more support for others. Choosing to form, staff, and maintain this group built goodwill with the Embassy staff and especially with the Ambassador—an advantage when cooperation, rather than command, is the normal mode of operation. Additionally, it can help salve wounds or recoup lost confidence when necessity or mistakes on one side result in bad feelings on the other.

Practice Shuttle Diplomacy. Having no peer with comparable geographic responsibilities, COM CFC-A made a point of visiting the other countries of the JOA, particularly Pakistan, to build consensus with senior U.S. diplomats, show interest in the situation in those countries, and familiarize himself with the senior leaders and issues. Because of the importance of Pakistan to efforts in Afghanistan, Islamabad was a monthly destination. Although much of a given visit might be spent with the Pakistani



U.S. Air Force (D. Myles Culen)

military leadership, the trips regularly included a visit with the U.S. Ambassador and other senior civilians in the Embassy. While the U.S. Office of the Defense Representative—Pakistan is headed by a flag officer, regular visits and briefings by the senior U.S. officer in the region contributed to understanding and trust and helped resolve issues early. The same concepts of consensus and confidence-building that CFC-A applied in Kabul were replicated by visits to U.S. Embassies in other countries.

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Understand the Importance of Personalities. Interagency cooperation is more art than science, even more so the specific cooperation between the Departments of State and Defense. The personalities of the senior leaders played a large role in U.S. success in Afghanistan. While the personae of leaders cannot be dictated or even adjusted, certain qualities or experiences may be more desirable and hence emphasized during selection.

By the time of his appointment, Ambassador Khalilzad had spent extensive time in the National Security Council and Department of Defense, as well as with the Department of State. That background provided him a deeper and broader understanding of political-military interaction, particularly the capabilities, limitations, and workings of military force. Other Ambassadors, political appointees or career foreign service officers alike, might possess less experience with military subjects and issues. General Barno did not have the same breadth of experience in national-level organizations, although he did have political-military experience as the commander of Task Force Warrior, which trained free Iraqi forces in Hungary during the buildup to the invasion of Iraq. More importantly, he came to the position with a cooperative mindset, dedicated to working with the Embassy in Kabul to further U.S. policy in Afghanistan. The two senior leaders began building a relationship in Washington before they arrived in Afghanistan, with Barno attending Khalilzad's swearing-in and the two returning to Kabul on the same flight. Their mutual respect and cooperation guaranteed that the disparate foreign service and military cultures would get along.

Unity of Effort

The interagency process has received increased scrutiny and has room for improvement. Changes to increase efficiency and synergy in the system are necessary to deal



of State officials and the uniformed military interacting in the area of conflict. Combined Forces Command–Afghanistan established and proved the value of several best practices that could help improve this coordination in a region in conflict. It is time to enhance the effectiveness of our national security team abroad and hence the security of the United States and its allies. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Joint Publication 3-07, *Joint Doctrine for Military Operations Other Than War* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, June 16, 1995), III-9, and Field Manual (Interim) 3-07.22, *Counterinsurgency Operations* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, October 2004).

² Kathleen T. Rhem, *Rumsfeld Impressed with Progress in Afghanistan Capital*, American Forces Press Service, May 1, 2003, available at <www.defenselink.mil/news/May2003/n05012003_200305016.html>.

³ This and the following accounts of activities in Afghanistan come from the author's experiences as the political-military officer for the Office of Military Cooperation–Afghanistan, then the Political-Military Division chief for CFC-A from July 2003 to July 2004.

with today's multifaceted and asymmetric threats. While the United States has a fairly established way to coordinate the interagency system at the national level, the leaders on the ground in a country in conflict have only general guidance and concepts. Some of these ideas, such as the Executive Steering Group, do not seem to take into account that today's JFC will likely command operations in a number of countries. Yet this is the commander who may need the most help, as he is likely responsible for political-military activities on a large scale with a minimal, and possibly ad hoc, military staff with limited interagency representation.

There are organizational problems with State, Defense, and CIA relationships in areas of conflict. The JFC will likely be responsible for furthering U.S. policy in an area comprising two or more countries, moving among those countries and dealing with their senior military and political leaders largely as he sees fit. On the other hand, if an Ambassador, who is typically accredited to only one country, has responsibilities in another country, the other country may not correspond to a country in the JOA. Like that of Ambassadors, the authority of CIA chiefs of station and USAID mission directors is usually limited to their country of assignment, with the first level of multi-country responsibility occurring at the respective organizations' headquarters in Washington. As the Center for Strategic and International

Studies report *Beyond Goldwater-Nichols: Defense Reform for a New Strategic Era* recommended in 2004, a Special Representative of the President in charge of all U.S. efforts in an area of conflict would go a long way toward improving unity of effort among the various practitioners of foreign policy there. Misalignment of geographical areas of responsibility will not ease the interagency friction that occurs in any area of conflict. A National Security Council review and realignment of the geographical regions of the major foreign policy players could streamline the efforts of these agencies by easing coordination and eliminating redundant efforts.

The United States is involved in a conflict with an elusive, transnational foe who will use terror, armed force, propaganda, and even diplomacy to achieve goals. Already heavily involved in Afghanistan and Iraq, and to a lesser degree in places like the Horn of Africa and Southeast Asia, Washington must look for ways to do more with limited resources. The massive U.S. humanitarian relief operation following the December 2004 tsunami in South Asia reemphasizes the imperative of improving interagency cooperation and the synergies and economies to be gained. One way to get the most out of the system is to improve the cooperation among the major participants in the execution of foreign policy, particularly the Department

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